

# THE DANGER OF HAIR

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**01. Bless, Fur Wig, 1996**

The fashion label Bless, created by the German duo Desire Heiss and Ines Kaag, negotiates the border between fashion and art. In 1996 they designed their first wig made of fur. The fashion designer Martin Margiela asked them to provide various wigs for his fashion show. The joke here is that, for humans, head hair and body hair are very different, while animals only have one sort of pelt which people then make into fur. By placing this fur on the head as hair, Bless shift the boundary between head and body hair and between human and animal hair.

**02. Meret Oppenheim, *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure)*, 1936**

This surrealistic object, a fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon, makes a bizarre impossibility into a reality. The fur cheerfully deconstructs the breakfast service. This work of art also appeals to the imagination, as the fur eroticises an everyday object. The cup, saucer and spoon become something to stroke and fondle, or acquire somewhat more sinister meanings in their animality.

Pelts of animals are made into fur as luxury products, which are used in many ways in fashion. Human hair, however, is a completely different matter. It is seldom incorporated in an accessory since it is actually rather gruesome when it is no longer on the head. We are more likely to encounter human hair in art than in fashion. We tend to regard loose hairs as nasty or dirty – think of the hairs caught in the drain of the wash basin. Human hair belongs to the category of bodily substances that become abject as soon as they are separated from the body. That is usually a question of bodily fluids such as snot, pus or urine, but hair or nail cuttings also evoke this experience of abjection: foul, distasteful and disgusting. This is because snippets of hair and nail clippings no longer belong to the living body, but have become dead material.

Human head hair occupies an intermediate position. It is actually only abject when it appears in places where it does not belong – in food, for example. But when hair is shorn off and made into a wig it is no longer nasty or dirty, since the beauty as well as the function of head hair are maintained. The wig is in fact the most well-known accessory made of hair. In our time wigs or hair-pieces are used to replace one's own hair in the case of unwanted baldness, but we are also familiar of course with the era of gigantically high wigs, when the wig was an essential accessory fulfilling a role as part of the total 'look'. Dolce & Gabbana's 2006 winter collection makes a nod to the era of wigs, and Vivienne Westwood and John Galiano have also shown exaggerated wigs on the catwalk. The wittiest commentary, however, must be the wig made of fur that Bless (Desire Heiss and Ines Kaag) made in 1996 and which Martin Margiela has used in his shows.





It takes some courage to do something different with cut off hair than the customary wig and to use it in accessories such as jewellery, bags, headdresses or in clothes. Because of its sometimes rather unpleasant associations, human hair is seldom used as a material in accessories. To start off with, a taboo against such improper use of hair had to be broken, which is what happened in the Surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s. This often involved putting hair where it does not belong, the classic example being Meret Oppenheim's *Le déjeuner en fourrure* (Fur-Covered Cup, Saucer and Spoon, 1936). In Salvador Dali's painting *Singularidades* (Singularities, 1937), all the figures and furniture are covered with human hair. And in the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Buñuel and Dali a woman's armpit hair disappears and then reappears on a man's mouth.

Another familiar Surrealist method was to equip women with a moustache and beard (here again it is a matter of hair being put where it does not belong), like the facial hair that Marcel Duchamp drew on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa in 1919, or the luxuriant moustache and beard with which Dali retouched Greta Garbo's face on the cover of a magazine in 1939. This fascination for 'women with beards' can also be found in the work of the photographer Zoe Leonard, as in *Pin-Up #1* (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe, 1995).

Armpit hair and pubic hair often function in Surrealism as erotic elements. Body hair was generally not to be seen in old paintings, and pubic hair was not painted until the end of the nineteenth century. The taboo on armpit and pubic hair was only broken with the advent of Modernism. Depicting body hair is part and parcel of a Modernist style.<sup>1</sup> Depicting a nude with body hair turns the woman into a sensual and sexual being.

It is only in recent decades that body hair has once again become a taboo in popular culture. Body hair is now undesirable for both women and men. Moreover, the hair boundary is receding further. Under the influence of pornography, among other things, it is not only legs, armpits and chest hair (for men) that are shaved or waxed but also the pubic area, resulting in 'pubic hair fashion' with patterns such as the strip, triangle, heart or ... a logo, as shown in Gucci's controversial ad campaign in 2003. The latest trend is 'Betty Beauty', a product designed to give the hair 'down below' a semi-permanent colour.

There are plenty of contemporary examples of a Surrealist approach to hair. In 1992 Robert Gober made a wax shoe with body hair 'growing' on the inside. The unnatural combination of wax and hair makes it a disturbing image, also because hair is found here in a place where it does not belong. Moreover, all sorts of dirty associations compete with each other, from stinking feet to abject body hair. More cheerful is the 'Finally Chesthair' T-shirt with a mat of chest hair designed by Walter van Beirendonck in 1996 (and currently on display in the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum). Ann Huyben has done something similar by designing a T-shirt-like dress with a digital print of a naked body (male or female) for roller skaters, visibly showing a dark thatch of pubic hair, so that it looks as though he or she is skating through the city in the nude. In 1999 the aforementioned duo Bless made the 'Hairbrush', a brush with long, wavy hair, a useless object that plays on precisely those abject feelings that hair can evoke. The hairbrush seems to be a variant of Mimi Parent's *Mistress* (1996), a whip of golden tresses. These last two objects bring us close to the fetishistic element of hair.

### 03. Robert Gober, *Untitled (hairy shoe)*, 1992

This shoe made of wax, on the inside of which sparse hair is 'growing', gives the viewer a shudder. Here the same surrealist principle is applied as in Oppenheim's fur breakfast service, namely the juxtaposition of elements that do not go together. Shoe and hair are at odds with each other. Unlike Oppenheim's work, where the fur evokes pleasant associations of stroking, the isolated human hairs strike one as dirty and distasteful. The viewer thinks of sweaty feet and itching body hair, and tends to turn away in disgust rather than burst out laughing.



### 04. Cover of the magazine *Pour Vous*, 11 October 1939, with a photograph of Greta Garbo retouched by Salvador Dali

Hair where it does not belong: a woman with beard and moustache. The Surrealist Salvador Dali makes fun of the icon of feminine beauty, film star Greta Garbo, by 'retouching' her photograph with a growth of male hair.





Fetishism is a term from psychoanalysis. According to the strict interpretation by Freud, fetishism refers to a male disorder, namely the boy's defence mechanism against the fear of castration. To allay this fear he denies the woman's physical 'lack' by shifting his attention to other parts of the body. By turning parts of the woman's body into a fetish, the man experiences it as 'whole' and perfect again. In common use fetishism usually refers to a fixation on an object or part of the body that the fetishist finds pleasurable. Considering that thick tresses are often seen as a phallic object and that the whip is used in sado-masochistic games, we can understand the fetishistic attraction of Parent's whip of golden tresses. This also makes Daniëlle Smits's jewelry made of braided (fake) hair, or the braided head-dress by 'Shoplifter' (Hrafnhildur Arnadóttir) less innocent than they appear at first sight. Hair simply remains a dangerous material that exists on the frontier between the living and the dead, the animal and the human, the beautiful and the abject, the physical and the sensual. Because of these disturbing properties hair will always be used more in art than in fashion.

#### Notes

1. Ann-Sophie Lehmann, 'Het andere haar', *Kunstschrift* 41, 2 (1997): 32-39.

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#### 05. Zoe Leonard, *Pin-up #1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe)*, 1995

Once again hair where it does not belong – in this case as a result of the disorder of 'hirsutism', which results in the growth of excessive body hair on a woman. The graceful pose of this female model with exces-

sive body hair makes the viewer aware of expectations about gender roles. This piece by the British photographer Zoe Leonard is also a comment on the norm of hairlessness in today's visual culture.



#### 06. Silvia B., *Lily Lucinda*, 2001

The Dutch artist Silvia B. goes yet a step further by meticulously covering a model of a girl with artificial hair, glass eyes and fake nails, turning her into a charming and hairy creature. She is strokable and sympathetic, but also a bit gruesome. The completely hirsute girl is at odds with every contemporary norm of feminine beauty, where the ideal is to be as smooth as an egg shell.





**07. Ann Huyben, dress, no date**

This short, skin-coloured dress by the Flemish fashion designer Ann Huyben has a digital print clearly showing the dark thatch of armpit and pubic hair, making it look as though the wearer is roller skating naked through the city. The exaggeratedly full and dark body hair makes the viewer aware that nowadays armpit and pubic hair are more and more often removed from the body.



**08. Walter van Beirendonck, *Finally chesthair*, 1996**

The Flemish fashion designer has designed a T-shirt with a mat of chesthair on the front so that every insecure man can feel masculine. At the same time the T-shirt is a playful criticism of the custom of male models to shave or wax their chests.

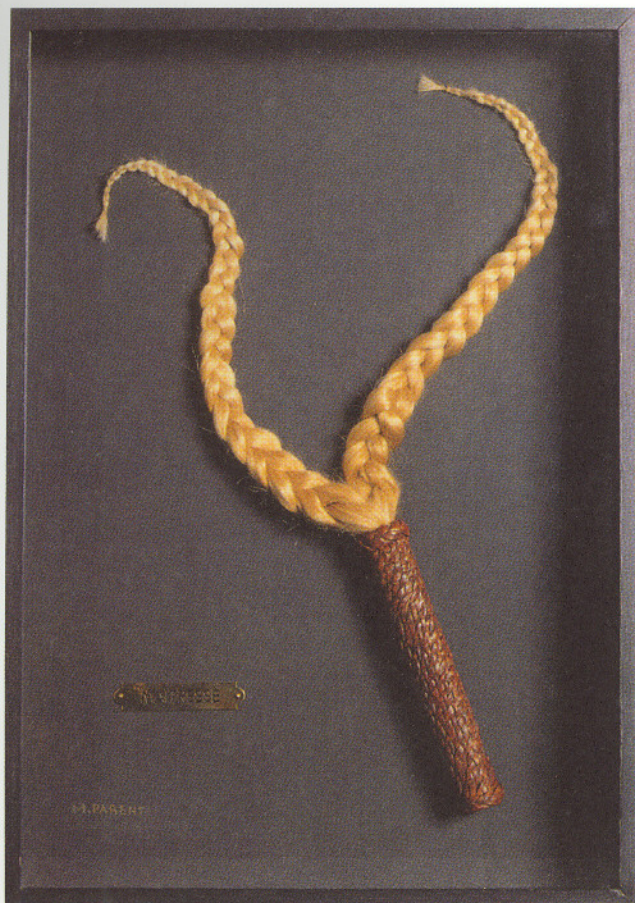


**09. Bless, *Hairbrush*, 1999**

Like Oppenheim's surrealistic breakfast service and Gober's shoe, this hairbrush by the duo Bless is an impossible object. The hair is contained in the brush so it can no longer be used for brushing. It is funny, but also a bit creepy since it looks as though the hair has been violently brushed off the head.







10. Mimi Parent, *Mistress*, 1996

The golden tresses negate the function of the whip but at the same time evoke associations with fetishism. Like the whip itself, long, wavy hair is often a fetish object. The tresses refer to attractive femininity, caressability and beauty, while the whip flirts with violence and dominance.



11. Daniëlle Smits, *Rapoenseltje*, 2003

12. *Rapoenseltje*, 2006

This jewellery made of fake women's hair looks innocent in itself, but naughtier suggestions also emerge. The thick, golden braid has both phallic and fetishistic qualities, thus acquiring sexual connotations. The necklaces are also reminiscent of the lock of hair of a loved one, whether deceased or not, that people in the nineteenth century often wore in a locket around the neck. In these pieces of jewellery the hair is dead material that was once living and can thus serve as a keepsake. This gives them a macabre touch, which is further reinforced by the skull in the braids.





13. Shoplifter (alias Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir) hair sculpture for Björk as part of the artwork for her album *Medulla*, 2004

These braided headdresses made of hair by the Icelandic artist Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir come the closest to traditional wigs. It looks as though the model's own hair has been used, so that the whole object has the appearance of a skilfully made up hairdo. But on closer inspection fake hair has been braided and made into a headdress to be worn as an accessory.

